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ABSTRACT

A student journal is an effective means of individualizing instruction for students involved in practicum learning experiences. Certain precise objectives, procedures, and guidelines for the actual observation and recording in the journal should be developed with the student prior to the initiation of the practicum. To maximize the amount of learning by the student, journal entries should include both the clinical observations and the analytical reactions of the student. The faculty member should provide guidance and prompt feedback to the individual student concerning the journal entries. Journals facilitate the individualization of instruction as the focal point of the practicum may be different for each student or each experience may be unique. Provisions for the reactions of the students further personalize the learning experience. Through the medium of journals, learning objectives in the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains may be met and students write creatively, think independently, and examine their beliefs and values. A great deal of effort is demanded from the student and faculty member, but the quantity and quality of the learning tends to indicate that journals generate a high return for the investment. (Author)

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Using Student Journals to Individualize Instruction

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Using Student Journals to Individualize Instruction

A student journal used in conjunction with a practical experience is an effective means of individualizing and personalizing instruction and learning. Essentially, a journal is a personal record of meaningful observations and reactions written while the writer is engaged in an in-depth practical experience.

Practicums or internships within a particular field of activity are often used as final transition experience designed to bridge the gap between academic classroom study and the real world. In the classroom, students tend to be exposed to the history, sociology, philosophy, and contemporary theory concerning a particular field of endeavor. When the student has control over this body of knowledge and theory, the culminating learning experiences is often a practicum out-there in the so-called real world. This is a type of curing period for the student designed to bring all of the academic knowledge into operation and testing in a real environment. Indeed all that preceded the practicum may have been preparation for this activity. Supervised teaching for pre-service teachers and in-hospital experiences for nurses in training are common, traditional examples of such experiences.

Today it is common practice to provide practicum experiences in such fields as business, banking, social work, psychology, retailing and public administration. We will probably see an increase of such programs in the future as the practicum realizes its potential as a learning experience in many diverse fields.

Too often students involved in a practicum wander aimlessly or are herded impersonally through real world experiences unsupervised by a faculty member and unrelated to the academic world by any guidance system.

Practicum students must be guided by someone familiar with the academic training received by the student and with experience in the real situation into which the student will be submerged in to-to for an extended period of time. The task of preparing the student for the total real world environment falls on the faculty supervisor. A vital part of any practicum takes place on campus in the briefing of the student before he enters the new situation. Once the student enters the real environment, the supervisor must continue to guide and support the student if the maximum benefit is to be derived from this learning activity. Without preparation and continuing liaison, the practicum degenerates into an interesting, time-consuming happening having little long-range impact on the student.

A journal properly kept by the student and carefully considered by the faculty supervisor serves to individualize and intensify the effect of the practicum as the student seeks to integrate theory and reality. The potential exists for a journal to be the vehicle to provide the practicum student with a completely individualized experience, a support and guidance system, and a personalized relationship with a faculty member.

Precise objectives for the actual participation observation and recording of the experiences should be developed with the student prior to the beginning of the practicum. Usually the student is insensitive to the raison d'être for the practicum. He enters the real world because that is what his program of courses stipulates. It becomes the function of the academic supervisor to define objectives and provide the rationale for the practicum. The reasons for keeping a journal need to be clearly delineated or it becomes merely a chore to be completed to satisfy an academic requirement. In general, a journal is maintained to record in a clinical manner exactly what happens in real life and to analyze in a knowledgeable,

but unique way the meaning of what one has experienced.

Maintaining the clinical observations is often easy for students of the natural, quantitative, and behavioral sciences for they are trained in this skill. Students of the liberal arts and social sciences sometimes experience difficulty separating what they experience from what they feel. On the other hand, students in the sciences may fail to react with depth to their observations while the student of English or history may tend to be stirred emotionally more than rationally. Both of these situations indicate the need for guidance to the student.

Differentiated and articulated goals meeting individual needs are vital for the same practical experience may serve vastly different goals for different students. Three trainees, one each in geriatric nursing, clinical psychology and social welfare might spend time participating and observing in a home for the aged. Each would probably have vastly different sub-objectives although the overall objective of serving the needs of the elderly might be a common goal.

Through individual journals, the unique goals of different students may be met even though they may be having similar or even the same basic experiences. Instruction may be individualized by differentiating focal points for the observers. Reactions to such experiences are idiosyncratic by nature, and therefore instruction is further individualized.

When the experience of each student is unique, the journal enhances the individuality of the already existing custom-made learning experience. For example, when one student of social welfare goes to a home for the aged, one to a geriatric ward of a hospital, and one to a social club for the aged, each experience is unique and through the journal the experience becomes even more made-to-order.

At the outset, a systematic, logical, and regular means by which experiences and reactions should be recorded must be clear to the student. Observations which clinically state experience and behavior should be separated from the accompanying value-laden reactions of the student. The difference between, "What is," and, "What ought to be," must be taught before the student is ready to write meaningful journal entries. It should be clear to the student that all people in the same situation would record basically the same behavior with perhaps differing emphases depending upon the objectives of the practicum. Conversely, it must be equally clear that all people in the same situation would react in a special manner based on personal values, beliefs, past experiences, biases, and perceptions. The value of the student's singular reaction must be stressed for in the real world the practitioner will behave independently of the teacher. It is important for that process to begin in the journal, as this is in preparation for behavior in the real world where the risk-taking is much greater and the support and guidance system almost non-existent. The supervisor must have a genuine respect for the reactions of the student, but must also seek the bases for these reactions.

An effective format is to write the clinical observation on the left page with the accompanying personal reaction directly opposite on the right page. Using this format the writer and reader may easily correlate observation and accompanying reaction without confusion and flipping of journal pages. A serious error occurs when journals are written in a manner which merges observations and reactions. One or the other tends to dominate and reality and fantasy mesh in an indecipherable manner resulting in grand confusion.

A time-table for recording and sharing the journal entries should be established in the beginning. Under no circumstances should a journal remain unread by the supervisor until the end of the practicum.

Prompt recording after each practicum session prevents the observation from becoming stale or superficial due to the forgetting curve. Reactions written simultaneously to the recording of the observations tend to preserve the emotional, critical, cathartic nature of the human response which occurred internally at the time of the observation. This candid, visceral response of the student is one of the most important effects of the practicum. Cleansed, censored reactions designed to match those of the supervisor are devoid of real worth to either participant in the journal-keeping process, student or supervisor.

Regular, prompt, written and oral feedback to the students from the supervisor is advisable in order to maximize benefits from the journal-keeping. Supervisors should provide either type of feedback to the student within a week's time or the impact is deminished. Written comments should be used supplemented by conferences when possible.

Judgmental reactions by the supervisor should be kept to a minimum, particularly at first, to assure that the student's reactions are not stifled or programmed to meet the judgments of the more experienced member of the practicum team. The practicum is designed to lessen dependency, not increase it. Therefore circumspection is required when offering feedback. Questions, rather than statements tend to stimulate the continual growth of the student's perception of reality, critical thinking, and analysis of situations and self.

As the student comes to realize the value of his own independent analysis of his experience, the supervisor may reveal his own value judgments concerning the situation. It is helpful if the supervisor labels his reactions as value judgments. This reminds the student that value judgments are NOT correct or incorrect; they are correct for whomever makes them.

To maximize the effect of the supervisor's comments, the journal entries submitted weekly or bi-weekly should be carefully read, annotated and returned to the student. Any written questions of the supervisor in the journal should be answered in writing by the student as soon as possible. Desirably the two will have an opportunity to discuss directly their reactions, comments, and questions, but written feedback and student response to that feedback assures a written dialogue which is valuable in lieu of oral dialogue. With some students, written interaction is more candid and open than direct interaction for the environment is less threatening than being in the physical presence of the supervisor forced to react within a brief time.

At all times, inaccurate factual data should be corrected by the supervisor or the student should be directed to sources of information. Data and judgments are treated differently for they are greatly dissimilar.

Criteria for the formal evaluation of the journal need to be established when objectives, procedures, and guidelines are defined. Dependent upon situational factors, basic criteria might include:

- regular entries in the journal
- separation of observations and reactions
- in-depth analysis of observations
- objective perceptions of reality
- effective communication of ideas
- reactions based on knowledge and rationality as well as individual emotional responses
- justification of reactions
- formation of valid conclusions based on data
- separation of significant events from trivia

. focal points for practicum were maintained

. objective self analysis.

The final entry in any journal should be an overall, penetrating analysis of the totality of the real life experience in terms of past knowledge, theory, and attitudes as tested against the present world of the practicum. It is quite probably that predictions for the future performance of practitioners in the given field might be made particularly for the future of the student within that realm. In essence, the student ought to seek an answer to the sociologist's basic question, "Now that I know what is out there, so what?"

Desirably this ending entry should be discussed at length with the supervisor. After final formal evaluation of the journal, it should be returned to the student in the anticipation that it may serve a worthwhile function in the future if the practitioner chooses to review and re-evaluate his initial experiences in the field.

Various effects result from the process of keeping a journal: learning objectives in all three domains may be met. In addition to cognitive and psychomotor objectives, the often neglected affective domain is included in the student's reacting to his own observations. Students also learn to write creatively, to think for themselves, and test their beliefs and values.

There is no question that journals demand a great deal of effort by the student and the faculty supervisor, but the amount, nature, and quality of the learning indicates an extremely high return to both participants for the investment.

Individualizing instruction means providing a unique learning experience appropriate to the needs, interests, and abilities of the student. Journals are an effective means of individualizing the learning resulting from a practicum.